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Commentary on “The Persuasive Force of the *Ad Baculum*” by John Patrick Casey

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“I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse.” This famous quote from *The Godfather* (Mario Puzo 1969) seems to illustrate quite well the extremely interesting approach proposed by John Casey on the *ad baculum* argument. Indeed, the very notion of “offer”, which presupposes a choice, self-destructs, because of the weight of the implicit threat. It seems to me that, if we extend Casey’s idea, it is crucially the *elimination* of any other standpoint that is at stake in the *ad baculum* fallacy.

Casey begins with an ingenious remark that shakes the very foundations of the main issue of this conference: basically, how can the appeal to force have anything to do with the argumentation field? “No amount of force is going to make someone believe something”. Moreover, it seems even contradictory, since argumentation is precisely seen as a cure for tyranny and violence. Considering the *ad baculum* as a fallacy means, according to the standard definition of fallacies that it “has three necessary conditions: a fallacy (i) is an argument, (ii) that is invalid, and (iii) appears to be valid” (Hansen 2020). In the present case, one can seriously doubt about the conditions (i) and (iii). The fallacy *ad baculum* cannot look like an argument, let alone claim any validity or any sort. Why? Precisely because it is obvious that the premise does not, in any way, support the standpoint as well as it is obvious that no one can ever consider a threat as a good way to support the conclusion. One of the merits of John Casey is precisely to challenge the doxa about the “argument to the stick” by precisely considering the importance of such obviousness: the *ad baculum* is not meant to deceive anyone, it is not trying to disguise itself as an argument. Yet, it has some persuasive force and Casey offers a salutary reflection to renew the perspective on the argumentative scheme. The informal logic approach of the scheme missed the point: it is precisely because the appeal to force is obvious that it has a persuasive force and it is completely nonsensical to consider that any appeal to force will have an effect on believing *p*. Casey argues that the main point is not about believing *p* but about defending *p*, about being committed to *p*.

I think that Casey’s demonstration is flawless and highlights with a great finesse the importance of not considering commitment and belief as synonyms. I will not write here a summary of his argumentation, which is perfectly clear and convincing, but I will try to expand his thought into two directions.

In the rhetorical-pragmatic approach that I advocate with Steve Oswald (Oswald & Herman 2019, Herman & Oswald to be published), our aim is to explain why linguistic devices may trigger some cognitive effects and why some rhetorical strategies may be more efficient than others to trigger these effects. For this reason, I am very sensitive to the approach put forward by John Casey, which consists in starting from the supposed effects of a rhetorical strategy, instead of considering a theoretical model of what might be a cogent argument. Here, the effect of an *ad baculum* lies supposedly in increasing the possibility to believe *p* – and Casey points out that it is irrelevant. Let us be clear: it is not only a lack of relevance between a premise

and its conclusion, but a lack of relevance of the whole rhetorical strategy. Now, if this strategy had no chance of being relevant, it would not have stood the test of time. If it continues to be used, it is probably because its effectiveness has been proven. Therefore, we need to find other explanations for its permanence. Those provided by natural logic, i.e. not realizing that there is no relevant connection between a premise and a conclusion, cannot be held, since the condition of success of the strategy is that the person who is the victim of *ad baculum* identifies the threat and the lack of relevance. Turning back into the intended effect and considering that the intended effect is not believing *p* but being committed to *p*, Casey offers a brilliant suggestion: the appeal *ad baculum* should be in fact considered as a double trigger strategy. The addressee of the appeal to force is merely an intermediary for future argumentation in which the addressee is now the speaker committed to *p* and may therefore increase the possibility to make his/her addressee believe *p*. I think that Casey's paper illustrates that our explanations of argumentative schemes, fallacies or rhetorical strategies should never forget the intended or effective effects in their scope. Describing a fallacy should take into account why it has been used over decades, why it is considered as an efficient way to achieve a goal, where does the "persuasive force" lie in.

After this first claim, I would like to investigate a second consideration about adopting *p* in order to make *p* believable downwards. The first step of the process – you are forced to adopt *p* and to be committed to *p* – as well as the traditional description of the fallacy by many informal logic textbooks is obviously focused on *p*. As a matter of fact, I think that the *ad baculum* is less about the idea of making people believe or, more accurately, adopt *p* than with the idea of preventing them from believing or adopting *q* - or any other proposition that is not *p*. Should we find the relevance of the threat, it would be directed to the idea that the addressee might defend something undesirable: i.e. not-*p*. This otherness seems to be obscured in many explanations of the fallacy. In the two examples given by Casey, the other proposition *q* is surfacing on a linguistic level: "if you *don't* believe it" suggests in fact, by the virtue of the negation, that someone, probably the addressee, may not believe *p*; "*of course* you support our bill" by the unnecessary presence of an obvious observation suggests that supporting this bill is not expected at all. The high probability that the addressee might defend *not-p* is precisely the reason to threaten the addressee if he/she persists. Therefore, it seems to me that it could be a more appropriate way to describe the *ad baculum* fallacy as a way to eliminate any other standpoint than *p*; in pragma-dialectics terms, it would mean that the *ad baculum* fallacy does less violate the relevance rule than the freedom rule ("Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question" van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 190). And therefore, the persuasive force of the *ad baculum* lies in the fact that I might be forced to be committed to *p* and to defend it if asked, while still believing *not-p*.

Hansen, H. "Fallacies", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/fallacies/>

Oswald, S. & Herman, T. 2019. "Give the standard treatment of fallacies a chance! Cognitive and rhetorical insights into fallacy processing". In van Eemeren, F. & Garssen, B. (eds), *From Argument Schemes to Argumentative Relations in the Wild. A Variety of Contributions to Argumentation Theory*, Cham: Springer, 41-62.

Van Eemeren, F., Grootendorst, R., & van Eemeren, F. H. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge University Press.